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Statement of purpose

Taking stock of the universe of positions and goals that constitutes leftist politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that a deep commonality underlies the apparent variety: What exists today is built upon the desiccated remains of what was once possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left and to evaluate their saliency for the possible reconstitution of emancipatory politics in the present. Doing this implies a reconsideration of what is meant by the Left.

Our task begins from what we see as the general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by simply "carrying on the fight," but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The *Platypus Review* is motivated by its sense that the Left is disoriented. We seek to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches on the Left—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke disagreement and to open shared goals as sites of contestation. In this way, the recriminations and accusations arising from political disputes of the past may be harnessed to the project of clarifying the object of leftist critique.

The *Platypus Review* hopes to create and sustain a space for interrogating and clarifying positions and orientations currently represented on the Left, a space in which questions may be raised and discussions pursued that would not otherwise take place. As long as submissions exhibit a genuine commitment to this project, all kinds of content will be considered for publication.

Submission guidelines

Articles will typically range in length from 750–4,500 words, but longer pieces will be considered. Please send article submissions and inquiries about this project to: review_editor@platypus1917.org. All submissions should conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

The *Platypus Review* is funded by:

The University of Chicago Student Government

Dalhousie Student Union

Loyola University of Chicago

School of the Art Institute of Chicago Student Government

The New School

New York University

The Platypus Affiliated Society

Platypus Review

Issue #48 | July-August 2012

1 Crisis of the eurozone and the Left

Haseeb Ahmed, Valentin Badura, Cengiz Kulac, Moritz Roeger, Jerzy Sobotta,
and Thodoris Velissaris

2 The relevance of Lenin today

Chris Cutrone

WWW:

Book review: Karl Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*

August Thalheimer

www.platypus1917.org

48

I want to give a brief picture of the German Left regarding their responsibilities of the German Left in the 1990s. There are massive effects from the economic meltdown in Europe, particularly in places like Greece and Spain, with mass unemployment and social upheaval. On the other hand, some countries like Germany are relatively stable and even expanding their economies. This is telling, in terms of the structure of Europe and the causes of the crisis as well. Germany was one of the main players in European integration, and a major German export industry was responsible. Germany competes every year a lot of it goes to the EU. Exports of high-tech goods and very high productivity form a solid infrastructure for the German economy. The last decade was also marked by the decline of the welfare state in Germany: significant cuts in social services, a steep decline in wages, and deregulation in the wage sector. Temporary employment is common. Low budget employment, insecure jobs, and early 2000s, caused a lot of anxiety about losing jobs to other countries within Europe. The EU has low-wage countries like Poland and Bulgaria, and of course there is always the fear that industries will move to Asia. The unions played a crucial role in avoiding this possibility

by choosing not to demand higher wages, so as to do their part in keeping Germany competitive. This is also reflected by the response of the German government: There is an imposition of financial reforms and especially austerity measures on other countries. Since Germany is one of the major economies in the European union, it will be affected by the general decline of Europe insofar as it bails out banks in other countries. Since it is one of the main backers of the financial support system, one could say that Germany is in large part to blame for the crisis itself. This situation is reflected in many leftists' political responses to the crisis, where we can see, especially on the more social democratic and union side, a great deal of nostalgia for Keynesianism. For example, the unions demand welfare state reforms, and the Linke wants to keep up national sovereignty in light of the dictation of cuts and austerity measures in other countries. They want to keep democratization within the Euro realm. Their response is a "New Deal in Europe," calling for massive investment and building up social infrastructure — basically, a re-play of the rise of the welfare state economy. The major trade unions in Germany — which differ from those in the United States in that they represent a more institutionalized mass — blame finance capital for the destroying wages. What they demand is a strong state that is supposed to be in charge of the economy; they demand that the market should work for the people, rather than the people for the market. Yet it is unclear whether such Keynesian responses are really adequate to the situation, given that the neoliberal era responses tend to understand the problem in a national framework, even if they use phrases like "a New Deal for all of Europe." The disparaging relationship between the EU countries will necessarily require some sort of response in Germany as one of the major economies.

day of action. One main point was to build a Europe-wide network of groups that can be more efficient in protesting the Eurocrisis than fragmented smaller groups dispersed throughout various cities, so that, for instance, you could have greater cooperation between people in Thessaloniki and groups in Frankfurt against privatizing of water supplies in Thessaloniki by German company. What really struck me was that this drive toward really broad networking was something new, or at least something I hadn't seen before, for the radical left in Europe. Twelve European countries in one network is something I have not experienced in my decade of involvement with the radical left. There were between three and six thousand people in Frankfurt's day of action and it was pure activist-ism. What the newspapers showed were people from the radical left and black bloc sacking the downtown area until late at night, attacking a police station, and so on; it was quite intense. There were also two demonstrations to mobilize for that event, each leading to a different story. The first one was in Wiesbaden, where there was a great deal of tension with the police. Afterwards

Theodoris Velissaris: I think that the major response to the crisis in Greece was the massive Indignados movement. It persisted for several months, it appeared in many cities, and when the #Occupy movement happened in the U.S., we thought it was their Indignados. For us this is an old story, as we had people with tents in the big squares, doing various things. The big difference is that the reactionary elements in Greece were more formidable and apparent because of the severity of the situation. The main slogans coming out of this basically said, "The politicians are traitors who are selling out our country, and we will resist this." There was a huge nationalistic impulse in the Indignados movement, which lasted for some months, and then stopped. The main phenomenon in the Indignados movement was the assemblies, where people stood like columns, waiting for their turn to speak, and when it was their turn they stated their opinion. For example: "Who's to blame? The U.S.!" And then there would be applause, and then someone else would come and say something. The idea was that we should express ourselves democratically and go to the streets to discuss our problems together. This was an interesting impulse, and it was certainly something different. Some groups tried to exploit it, but these Indignados really hated political parties—they actually destroyed some tables of established parties that tried to give them material. It was a bit unfortunate that they hated the Indignados by parties. The Indignados thought of themselves as representing the people who were now organizing in a truly libertarian manner. But then after four months it disappeared. The various austerity packages were passed, and of course there were the demonstrations, some with spectacular conflicts, but nothing worked in terms of halting or even really installing the packages. This kind of response to European organizations reminded me of the beginning of the 2000s; after 1999, there was considerable coordination between various groups around Europe for events like May Day, and things like that. The response to crisis in Greece is nationalistic in orientation, meaning that all the various tendencies within that, if we organized our economy differently,

people who were organizing this demonstration remarked, "Oh yeah, that's what you get when you see how the police are treating us. We have to fight police. See how we stand against police." But on the other hand we had a demonstration in Göttingen that didn't face that problem. It didn't really rise up as police intervention. What you read about in reports of that event was that everyone had a really fun time—there was a nice rave in the middle of the city. One line that really struck me said at this event, in effect, "We told the police to hold back all the time, no matter what happens."

One way or another, the German working class will play a role in shaping German policy. With the above-mentioned responses from Die Linke and the mass unions, it is hard to see how that role could be a progressive one. Even in the ultra-left groups, the issue is primarily about nationalism. An anti-national stance is common as a response to the nationalism of the unions and the more established left parties. Nevertheless, the anti-national left groups do not really have an international orientation in terms of their politics. They strive to get certain catch phrases out there, in the context of neighborhood organizing and so forth. Frankly, there is a great deal of cluelessness regarding the international crisis. The confusion of the German left groups in this situation is concurrent with a lack of imagination in terms of how to address the crisis, or even how to use it productively for their own causes.

Hasseeb Ahmed, Valentin Badura, Cengiz Kulac, Moritz Roeger, Jerzy Sobotta, and Theodoris Velissaris

Crisis of the eurozone and the Left Responses to the global economic downturn

Eurozone, continued from page 1

then we would do better. Their “correct” set of principles of economic policy would correct the problems. So even the anarchists imagine that if we were living in communes, for example, then we could still buy new laptops and new telephones and we wouldn’t have to face these austerity problems. The Stalinists think that under a Stalinist regime in Greece we wouldn’t face this problem. All the various tendencies have this nationalist prism to deal with the crisis. But, then, those who are not nationalistic tend to be reformists. For example, many Eurocommunists admire this theory of Nicos Poulantzas—whose teacher was Althusser—which views the state as neutral and always an important factor, but the theory itself mirrors the class antagonism. On either the national level or the European level, there is support for these popular movements from below, but often with the idea that we can simply use the state to turn the situation precisely 180 degrees for the working classes: We use the state to make a bad situation—for everyone, really—into a good situation for the working class. This tends to be nationalistic; they are anti-neoliberal but, for them, this simply means being anti-American. So they still believe that social democracy can flourish in Europe, if we elect the right governments, and if the parliaments have more left representatives. They don’t have an international perspective on capitalism and the capitalist crisis.

Haseeb Ahmed: Today I’ll speak from my experience living in the Netherlands this last year and from my experience as a member of Platypus since 2006. Cuts to culture funding in the Netherlands will take effect January 1st, 2013. The Jan van Eyck Institute, where I am a fellow, is a unique place for state-funded research and production with a history of nearly 60 years, which will cease to exist. However it’s important not to take the Jan van Eyck or even the cuts to Dutch culture funding in isolation, but to do the work of clearly linking the rise of austerity measures, nationalism, and xenophobia across Europe and internationally.

Within six months of my arrival in the Netherlands, I received an open letter titled “Beyond Quality,” from the minister of culture of the newly empowered VVD (Peoples’ Party for Freedom and Democracy) and PVV (Party for Freedom), right-wing coalition governments. It announced 30–60 percent cuts to most cultural institutions. This is putting thousands of people out of work. “The responsibility of excellence will rest entirely with the artist, him or herself, and the market.” Taxes on commercial galleries in the Netherlands were nevertheless raised 13 percent. This was one instance of the deeply irrational character of the newly empowered and supposedly pragmatic right-wing coalition government. In the Netherlands, the cuts to culture funding came together with cuts to healthcare, mental health care, and immigration services. These cuts represented themselves under the guise of necessary austerity measures. However, the GDP-to-deficit ratio in the Netherlands is well within the standards the European Union membership laid out in the Maastricht Treaty of 1992. It is clear then that austerity measures have a function beyond their supposed economic necessity. This latent ideology enacted by withholding finance capital in southern EU member states also guides the budget policies taking shape in the U.S. and elsewhere. Within Europe, the Netherlands is understood as a cultural and economic laboratory, and also as a kind of indicator, which goes back to the history of the Netherlands after World War II when the Marshall Plan invested in it heavily. A lot of that funding went towards developing communications infrastructure, especially for the distribution of American media, including film, and so forth. In light of the logic of the Dutch government’s austerity measures, a left opposition would have to take steps to link the opposition movements in other affected countries as well as the mass opposition movements in Greece, the 15M movement in Spain, the anti-tuition fee movement in Britain, and the #Occupy movements in America. All of these share a common anti-ideological or anti-authoritarian character—and perhaps also an apolitical character, in that they often refrain from identifying themselves as left movements at all. To some this ambiguity is a valued quality. However, it poses a serious problem in terms of the development of a left attempting to overcome the conditions of capital.

The largest demonstrations against cuts came on June 27, 2011, the eve of the debate which would finalize the cuts to culture funding. It involved an estimated 10,000 people who marched from Rotterdam, in what was called the “March of Civilization.” Their slogans included “defense of culture,” and “no culture no future,” not deviating much from this line. The propagated symbol of the opposition was the well designed white x on a black background. Though many young people are being politicized for the first time through them, these demonstrations in the culture sector had no effect like the demos that were organized along the same lines in the mental health services and immigration services sectors. Without acting in solidarity with the protests against other austerity cuts, these culture demos were organized along the same lines of the government funding structure that was now being revoked. The ineffectuality of this was very clear. So the problem was not one of too little too late but, rather, that the chosen oath of defending culture led to a flattened political imagination. The “March of Civilization” put forth culture as the vanguard of civilization; this was its political content. Its argument was that a cut to culture was a step backwards to barbarism. However, we know very well that popular culture is more often than not barbarism, so why go the route of identifying one’s job with the eternity of human civilization in order to form an opposition to those who attempt to abruptly liquidate that job?

When Geert Wilders said, “Art is a left wing hobby,” he had a nuanced point: How does art in general engender a left wing audience? (Wilders is the leader of the Freedom Party (PVV), and the Supreme Court of the Netherlands has recently cleared him of inciting violence against Muslim and immigrant populations in the Netherlands.) While his party is openly xenophobic, anti-immigration, supportive of free market capitalism, and the face of the far right in Europe for individuals like

Breivik, Wilders is able to make a more sophisticated point on the role of contemporary art in politics than the Left. Meanwhile the Left is caught trailing behind the emergent right, asking, “What can we learn from populism?” How is this role reversal possible? The answer to this can be sought, I think, in the reluctance of students, artists, and intellectual cultural workers to fully take up an oppositional, left wing politics.

There isn’t very much mobilization along the traditional sectarian lines in Holland at all, and one can attribute this to the Dutch cultural model of politics called “consensus culture.” This is said to have roots in the aftermath of the suppression of the Provo movement—a brand of anarcho-situationism that dominated the Dutch left in the years leading up to 1968. While this suppression occurred at the hands of Amsterdam’s longtime mayor Gijsbert van Hall, a Communist Party member, the real defeat took the form of a process by which the Provo movement was absorbed into the state by legalizing squatting. The movement was largely organized around the issue of squatting, property rights, and the right to create communal forms of organization inside. This strategy of including all substantial dissent into the democratic model has been the Dutch approach to governance since 1969. At present this same model is used to integrate, legitimize, and shield the xenophobic right because of its popular appeal.

If you look at the Jan van Eyck, the situation has gotten quite ugly; van Eyck is completely isolated from the other academies and there isn’t any kind of left forming there even after the 10,000-person march. There weren’t even any independent groups that formed after. Various international researchers, as well as people simply worried about the state of the world, are concerned with the transnational rise of forms of right-wing populism, some of which have found particularly acute expression in the provincial capital of Maastricht, yet have been unable to mount an effective political response. In the Netherlands, the opposition to funding cuts in the cultural sector in the Netherlands points to how a potentially emancipatory left is being deformed by the political imagination at present.

Valentin Badura: I’ll speak in particular about Austria—a country that has not been as drastically affected by the economic crisis as other countries—and the leftist movements there, and I will offer a critique of it. My point is not so much to analyze where its shortcomings are, or to speculate about the extent to which it is simply endorsable or dismissible. Rather, I want to analyze the ways in which the Left has become more confused and less confused in its orientation in the wake of #Occupy, and what this tells us about the Left. #Occupy as well as the critique of it developed in the context of the anti-globalization movement, which in Germany and Austria was not particularly in the memory of Seattle 1999, but rather January 2001, as well as the events around the G8 summit in Heiligendamm in 2007, which is of course far more recent than Seattle. Regarding #Occupy, several cities in Austria had events, the biggest naturally being in Vienna, with 1,500 people. The official self-understanding was that the movement was coming both from OWS as well as the Spanish Indignados movement. In fact, Stéphane Hessel, who wrote Time for Outrage!, even spoke in Graz. There was maybe one tent that remained in Vienna, but surprisingly three weeks after in November, in a small town in western Austria—in Innsbruck in Tyrol—about ten people started a camp and they had approximately 500 supporters. But when it comes to the actual meetings there were never more than two dozen. There was another action day in January, which only attracted around two hundred people. The movement in the U.S. was broad—the church, Christian organizations, bourgeois parties, left-wing parties, esoteric people like conspiracy theorists, and even openly right wing parties participated in various places.

But there was a typical problem in Austria a day before the movement was to start: It came to light that one professor who was to speak was implicitly questioning the Holocaust. He said that the question of the genocide cannot ultimately be answered because there’s no objective and ideology-free discussion on the question, and therefore one cannot say whether there were gas chambers. He is in the party dedicated to abolishing the debt system and his fellow in the party speaks about the money of the Jewry and the spiritual Jewish leaders of the U.S. government; he has also said something to the effect that even Nazis are welcome in his party, even though he doesn’t share their opinions. So when it become public before October 15, when he was to speak at the University of Economics of Vienna, where he teaches, they immediately suspended him. Yet #Occupy Austria was ambivalent toward this, because they wanted it to be open for everybody. There was a big debate and actually some of the organizers quit because they were exhausted with it, but in the end the controversial speaker appeared and spoke at both events. The Austrian right wing party is the Freedom Party of Austria, holding 30 percent of the government votes, and will soon potentially win in Vienna. They were not part of the movement itself but they are running a campaign where they take on slogans like “Millionaires and bankers should be made to pay, not the broad masses”, and “Our heart beats red red red,” which is the color of the Austrian flag. They also showed up at the debates about Greece with sayings like, “Our money for our people! Why should we pay to finance the Greeks?”

Many on the radical left snubbed their nose at #Occupy Austria and quickly turned away. But what is interesting about it is that in their critique of it they had nothing more to say than what the mainstream media says. Organizations like ATTAC (Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions and for Citizens’ Action), which had a leading role in the anti-globalization movement, distanced themselves from the professor and provided the usual criticisms. The Left in Austria felt, “Oh they’re anti-Semitic—case dismissed. We know better.” But no one asked the question about what it means that a leftist critic is indistinguishable from either a bourgeois critic or from reformist movements. What I want to point to is simply that the radical left, in their critique of #Occupy, being indistinguishable from the critique of bourgeois

mainstream as well as the reformist left, is as indicative of confusion on the Left as #Occupy’s lack of clarity in terms of what it is against and whom they want to address. At least in Heiligendamm people were unified under the idea of being against G8. In fact, at the World Economic Forum at Davos in January, the founder of the event started with the question of whether the capitalist system fits in today’s world. In the opening debate, the moderator asked the audience if they think that the current form of economy is adequate to society in the 21st century, and more than half of the audience said no.

Whereas in the U.S. Occupy Wall Street was a believable expression of discontent, in Austria, everyone on the Right and the Left “agrees”—yet this makes the problems of the Left more pressing, not less!

Cengiz Kulac: The neoliberal developments of the 1970s actually arrived in Austria in the 1980s. In the 70s, the Social Democratic Party of Austria came into power and had an absolute majority in the parliament. The legal base of the social welfare state was set up in the 70s in Austria, not like in Western Europe, where it was set up in the 50s and 60s. The Social Democratic Party lost in 1983 and they built a coalition with the conservatives, so the first cuts to social spending came into force around 1985–86. This proved to be a remarkable date because the Freedom Party, the extreme far right party that had normally around 5–6% of the votes, suddenly came into its own as a significant political force and not merely a symbol for the strong German nationalist base of their party. What is also remarkable is that the Freedom Party is very schizophrenic, unlike the NPD in Germany, which is clearly a Nazi party. Until the 90s it was a liberal and nationalist party with sections that were deeply nationalist, picking up the remains of the Nazi league in Austria, and on the other hand it declared itself a socially liberal force. They split in the early 90s and this was the path of the Freedom Party to their highest gain in 1999, with 27% in the elections.

My point bring up the elections is to indicate what political ideology the mass is tending towards. In 1999, 27% voted for the Freedom Party and this date symbolized in my opinion a shift generally to the right, a conservative turn in Europe. What is very interesting is that the intellectuals around this time were an accurate gauge of the future right-leaning European tendency. A conservative government emerged out of the conservative party and the Freedom Party. Due to corruption, they lost an election and, though everyone thought they would vanish, they returned in 2008. Actually they are a stronger movement than ever before. So now we again have a coalition of social democrats and conservatives. The economic crisis in 2008 didn’t affect Austria as much as it affected the other southern European countries; we actually now have an unemployment rate that is lower than before the crisis. Since Austria is very similar to Germany, in the sense that it is an exporting country, the crisis actually helped Austria in many ways. Yet, despite the economic growth, cuts were enforced later on, in 2010, all the same.

I was elected in 2009 as president of the student union in my hometown. Immediately afterwards, occupations occurred in my university and many other universities in Austria. Occupations spread to around 100 universities all over the world, with diverse outcomes. What was interesting about this movement, if you can say it is a response to structural developments of the last 30 years, is that it is not reacting immediately to policy enforcement—there were no cuts at this time. It was a very ambivalent movement in Austria because, on the one hand, it had an emancipatory aim in terms of education, and it was not only focused on tuition hikes and how students finance their education, but it was also about how we see and want to structure education. Austria has a very open education system with no tuition, and if you graduate high school, you can directly go to university. If people want to study something they go to the subscription office and say so. So the change in the education system in the 70s still gives the student movement a strong boost. But in 2010 social cuts came, student loans were cut, and more people began to take part in the protests. In 2009 fewer people took part than in 2010, when it developed into a bigger movement, but one that was more immediately reactionary. There were broad coalitions between Catholic organizations, social workers, student unions, and left liberal parties. In 2011, the austerity policies of the national government impacted local governments, and even more people walked out on the streets. This is significant, as there is a change in the political system in Austria, with parties becoming less important on the one hand, and on the other, the policy enforced makes people protest as in many other countries.

I am affiliated with the Greens in Austria. I was a political activist from the young age of 14; I worked in student organizations in high school and founded Green alternative student organizations and candidates for presidency of the student counsel. I wouldn’t say I was an activist, actually; I was in many ways a politician. These often converged because being president of the student union in Austria means overseeing a political organization that has around 1.5 million euros to administrate in any one year—leftist organizing is highly institutionalized in Austria. In many ways it was the student union and the forces within the student union—a legal organization, a statutory organization, set up by law—that also organized the squatting and the protests against austerity polices. The chief problem that I faced when starting as president of the students’ union was that members were, and still are, deeply depoliticized.

Q & A

Greece is obviously in a very tough situation right now but what are the consequences, as imagined by the opposition to austerity, of Greece refusing to go along with austerity?

TV: Those who oppose the austerity measures try to downplay the consequences. Those who support the austerity measures are trying to highlight the consequences. But, interestingly, both sides point to Argentina when it defaulted. There was some kind of radicalization there perhaps and some people say the fact that it took ten years to return is not that much—but of course those ten years in which Argentina recovered

were not years of a global recession. Usually people who oppose austerity imagine that defaulting means we will suffer for a period and then we’ll be free: There will be a transition period but afterwards we will be independent, able to implement our monetary policy, and devalue currency, and all that stuff the Greek government used to do in the 90s, before the Euro. What I think is that the consequences of a default wouldn’t be massive famine, per se, but would be politically reactionary. In the absence of a real left on an international level, I can’t imagine that the direction would not be reactionary.

Two questions: First, you sketched out the different, largely utopian positions that have been held on the Greek crisis. There’s one position that is a very eloquent defense, I think, of socialism in one country by Costas Lapavistas. I completely disagree with him, but what he argues is that, if Greece defaults, it can get by through what he calls “war socialism.” He literally says that we’ll have rationing. I take it people won’t be starving en masse but the depth of the problem should give us pause. The other position that prevails is that Greece will go, then first the Greek workers will rise, then Spain, then Italy, and kind of a domino effect will ripple across Europe. I think it is also a utopian perspective not only because it’s so far away, but also because I don’t think it’s the way we should understand revolution. What do the panelists think of these scenarios for Greece?

Second: There’s an objective need for European working class unions, essentially—that need also has to find expression at some level in the student movement or in student politics. In the past ten years we’ve groped towards some kind of cross-European unity, but it’s been largely very unserious, and some of the groups our German comrades have been describing just sound to me like idiots: A strategy of riots and burning things isn’t going to advance us much, really. What steps can be taken to reignite, rekindle the European student movement across borders, and to refocus the debate on how, if we are to get out of this mess, European working class unity is fundamentally, objectively needed? I don’t just mean that in an abstract sense of a Communist Party in the European Union, but rather as a question of taking the people opposed to austerity and organizing them into a serious political force. You all seem to agree that the ways we are currently “organizing,” whether through more demonstrations à la May ’68 or simply through rioting, just are not working. But what, then, is our task?

CK: I would like to respond a little bit to the issue of students against austerity. It’s not only about austerity policies affecting education, it’s about this deep transformation of the education system, which came along with the neoliberal order rising in the 1970s. It is a structural transformation of the higher education system. The problem of mobilization within the education system is a deep one. In the student union you couldn’t get students to work with you about certain political issues even if they were single-issue topics. We have to recognize that first.

JS: What kind of comes out in the crisis is that those different flavors of the Left are in many ways a response to each other. In Germany, with the context of the former GDR you have to keep in mind that 20 years ago, there was actually existing socialism in Germany and that leaves its traces on the Left. A broad wing of Die Linke, the left-wing party, consists of former GDR members. So you have those debates about the need for working class politics, but in the context of anti-authoritarianism, which in many ways is a response to that form of state socialism, on the one hand, and on the other to this kind of pseudo-fascistic, union social-democratic corporatism. If, in light of the economic crisis, the response of Michael Sommer, the head of the DGB, the German Union Coalition, is to say that finance capital needs to be regulated on a national basis and we need a strong state to suppress social contradictions in favor of the welfare state, with the state representing everyone in society, it would be a sort of fascism. So there is the anti-authoritarian response to both the post-Stalinist, established older left, and the kind of politics entrenched in current labor formations. Of course the anti-authoritarian left is younger. They come from similar social strata or have a similar ideology to 1990s protest culture. There is a cultural affinity towards the 90s and one would have to look into that, as well as a prevalent romanticism of Keynesianism, with the desire to reenact a New Deal for all of Europe. #Occupy in Europe was a weak phenomenon; the response of the Left was that it did not need to engage as much as in America. So it was much more “business as usual.” Then you have this mixture of 90s protest politics, similar to the mobilizations in Seattle, which is obviously an American model.

There are, however, three major imaginations of what should happen in Europe. One is the liberal imagination that Europe would be a financial pact in which Germany is dictating financial policies in all of Europe. The second is the welfare-statist imagination, in which Europe would become something like one big Scandinavia. And the third is the anarchist, anti-authoritarian imagination of Europe in which it would all become one big squat. I agree that there is no international working class response. Of course, to solve anything in Greece, you would need a working class response in Germany, but the utter political confusion in the face of this enormous task is not going to be solved in a few weeks.

VB: The way you asked the question, “how to act,” skips over the question of whether, and to what extent, we can act in the present. I’m more pessimistic about action in a broader emancipatory perspective, but I’m less pessimistic about certain reformist attempts. It’s true there won’t be a return to a welfare state of the 1970s, but, as Haseeb pointed out, a lot neoliberal reconstruction is ideological in motivation. European-wide reformist politics at the level of the European Union, which Die Linke engages in building, does allow for certain hopes. Perhaps from the exhaustion of that, one hopes for a more radical perspective. But for now,

Eurozone, continued from page 3

there’s only reformism. The starting ground in Germany is in certain ways easier, in certain ways more difficult. It seems to me, in comparison to what I experienced in the U.S., there’s a certain sensibility about what not to do. It doesn’t mean that the Left is in a better position to reconstitute itself, but in regards to the idea of the Left being dead, both in terms of manpower and on an ideological level, can perhaps be grasped in a broader sense in what might be called the German context. If the Antideutsch project succeeds—the extent to which it can is open to debate—the result is still a Left in a somewhat better position to ask these questions. Since the general need to address the confusion is apparent, the difficulty lies in making people feel that actively working through the confusion by talking about politics—and not just about theory and history, and not just contemporary politics—may be worthwhile.

TV: About Costas Lapavistas, he’s an economist based in London, I think, and he’s a member of a coalition of extra-parliamentary groups in Greece. They support the exit of the eurozone, nationalization of the banks—a series of reforms. It is nationalistic in a sense, but then, is the European Union internationalist? I don’t think so. I don’t think we can base our internationalism on the reasoning that, by supporting capitalist institutions, this will “objectively” be a base for our emancipation.

The EU is a capitalistic international union that actually feeds into nationalism. It is nationalistic and reactionary, but the other political perspectives on offer at present tend to be only pseudo-international, as well. People imagine that they can be in a national level of self-sufficiency, and then build an international coalition. Meanwhile, the support for the EU consists in an opposition to the global developments of the America-driven kind of neoliberalism, but only on the basis of a supposedly better, European version of capitalism.

As for riots, they are political, but I agree they don’t lead the situation anywhere. However, what is political? Parliamentary participation, extra-parliamentary opposition, radicalism, platformism? Have these things proven anything? Have any of these forms of political action been developing in the direction of greater political clarity, vision, power? Have any proven themselves to be factors of change, or have they simply tailed behind the changes that unfold?

The panelists have been telling the story of the crisis but it sounds just like more of the same kinds of left responses as have occurred for the last ten or twenty years. I didn’t hear anything different, even though the issue of nationalism seems to have intensified recently. Is there anything new, or is there just more of the same? Consequently, are we experiencing the exhaustion of the same?

JS: One problem today is how the Left continues to think in terms of an opposition between transformative revolutionary politics and reformism. This framework doesn’t really work when there does not even seem to be any real *reformist* response to the crisis. When the unions or social democracy call for a new New Deal for Europe, this indicates amnesia for what the last New Deal meant for Germany, which emerged out of a mass working class movement. It came out of two revolutions—one of them in the heart of Europe, that in many ways prefigured the kind of welfare state response on the national level. But now there’s nothing. The exhaustion of neoliberalism is itself a crisis of the welfare state. With organizations like Die Linke, a fair share of their constituency and welfare-statist reforms aim at a social strata that right now doesn’t take any political power.

I think “exhaustion” articulates the spirit quite well. To describe this with more detailed examples, what happened with part of the German Left is that we had an era in America, which was characterized by war in Europe, which of course captured the attention of the Left internationally. In Germany there was this big split in the Left, with a younger, to a certain extent self-consciously Marxist response in regards to imperialism in those changed conditions after the fall of the Berlin Wall. It was not really a sufficient response. Some deeper questions of the Left were raised but weren’t resolved. That they weren’t able to resolve those issues indicates that today those splits that formed during an earlier period are glossed over. Those splits exhausted the Left itself. It drew a lot of force outside of the Left in Germany. Now there’s this strong desire to say, “Let’s reunite, settle down, we have a new problem, a new crisis, let’s go along as we once went,” so it’s no coincidence that there is this return to a more activist, 1990s-style Left protest culture. Exhaustion takes different ideological forms, which also makes it harder to deal with because by all appearances there is something happening on the local level.

An actual Left would try to deepen the crisis, and not resolve it, whereas the Left today only offers meager resolutions. The anarchists try to resolve it by having communal farms, while the welfare statistis try to resolve it by upholding a social welfare state. But no one really tries to deepen the crisis, which would involve difficult questions of political power and what it would mean for the Left to wield it.

Concluding remarks

TV: The situation in Europe points to the palpability of regression. It makes that apparent because, at this level of crisis, the Left is unable to be an important factor. For decades we have been hearing from the Left, “When a crisis hits, we will prove ourselves.” This has not proven to be the case at all. I don’t know if we have another date with revolution—many thought the new millennia would destroy civilization, and now its always ten years later, and ten years after that. We have to really try to understand what regression means, and how the present is informed by it. Instead of concocting external recipes that simply oppose this regression, we have to ask, What is the potential of regression? The questions that emerge are, How can regression be transformed? Or, can this energy of exhaustion be used for another direction?

To have a real solution involves certain preconditions;

one has to be able to deal with the problem before one makes the situation even worse. Today, the Left in Europe, as it stands, is an obstacle for any possible emancipation—there is a reason why people are turning to the right. There is a responsibility on the part of the Left to take ourselves seriously enough that we try to understand how the Left itself has played its part in bringing about this state of affairs and how it is that the Left has regressed to a point where it is not really able to decisively influence the political situation.

HA: What struck me in Europe is that, on the one hand, there is an erosion of social democracy, which drives people towards identifying themselves as an opposition, but on the other hand this drives them towards a sort of national standpoint, because the situation is supposedly concrete at that level. For students, when a lot of this erosion takes the form of something like the Bologna Process, which is very much like transforming the universities into privatized American-style universities, it makes sense that you have this kind of “concrete” form of left politics based on immediate opposition. I like this emphasis upon trying to find a way to work within the context of exhaustion rather than attempting to find an immediate solution to exhaustion—because every group that I’ve encountered, in a way, attempts to find the correct position or principle in relationship to the crisis, but only in this or that particular local manifestation. What is more interesting is a context in which that can become intensified beyond the confines of the state, or beyond Europe, but also trans-historically as well.

VB: I am not even sure to what extent a Marxist needs to have “answers” to the EU, the Greece bailout, etc. It might even be adding to the confusion if one does. When I was speaking earlier of still seeing prospects for reformism, I did not mean that in the sense of an opposition to anti-capitalist perspectives. I just meant the struggle for reform is only that confusing when it is couched in the language of exceeding what is actually possible. For example, Die Linke says that a minimum wage of fifteen euros is possible, but that’s an illusion—it is regression for it to appear like that’s possible. I agree that the attempt to halt neoliberal reforms is limited. But I disagree with saying that neoliberalism has exhausted itself in Austria. In fact, it’s still arriving, in a way. It’s not that the welfare state is gone, as there’s still a clearly visible difference between Austria and the U.S. or the UK. It may just be a question of time—the austerity measures that Greece is now facing may well be faced by Austria or Central Europe in the near future. What is new, in my opinion, is the odd circumstance of #Occupy being a comprehensive phenomenon in society. Nobody really opposes it in Austria in terms of content, which is hard to deal with ideologically. The right-wing parties don’t show up at #Occupy, but they do share the same sentiment, and everyone calls for more social politics. What actually distinguishes the Left from the Right has become unclear.

CK: I think this moment of the crisis within the Left is a moment of re-thinking. But this re-thinking is only for a very small section. The question of nationalism was raised, and I would say the Left itself is nationalistic not only in Greece, but also the German Left with the anti-Deutsch, as well as the Catalanion Left with its anti-Francoism—because they think Franco is still alive in some way even if he died in ’75—and so on. The question remains regarding what the contribution of the Left response to the crisis will lead to, because there are two possibilities. One, I don’t think the neoliberal order is becoming stronger through the crisis. It’s actually disintegrating in the European Union. There are antagonistic forces in the European Union at the moment, but the question is still whether the response of the Left may end up strengthening the neoliberal order, or prolonging it. Or, if it will lead to the nationalization of Europe. The lack of a pan-European civil society also means that there is no pan-European Left, and this leads me back once again to the point that the European Left is nationalistic. There should be much more critical consideration of this fetishization of history in Europe, with anti-Francoism, the anti-Deutsch, etc., and to view these as obstacles. The international problem is that there is no international. **IP**

Transcribed by Brian Hioe and Jacob Cayia

Relevance of Lenin, continued from page 2



Detail of Diego Rivera, “Man at the Crossroads” (1933), mural at Rockefeller Center, New York City, photographed by Lucienne Bloch before it was destroyed on Nelson Rockefeller’s orders in 1934.

The relevance of Lenin today: political and social revolution

All of this seems very far removed from the concerns of the present. Today, we struggle not with the problem of achieving socialism, but rather have returned to the apparently more basic issue of democracy. This is seen in recent events, from the financial crisis to the question of “sovereign debt”; from the Arab Spring to Occupy Wall Street; from the struggle for a unified European-wide policy, to the elections in Greece and Egypt that seem to have threatened so much and promised so little. The need to go beyond mere “protest” has asserted itself. Political revolution seems necessary—again.

Lenin was a figure of the struggle for socialism—a man of a very different era.¹⁷ But his self-conception as a “Jacobin” raises the issue of regarding Lenin as a radical *democrat*.¹⁸ Lenin’s identification for this was “revolutionary social democrat”—someone who would uphold the need for revolution to achieve democracy with adequate social content. In this respect, what Lenin aspired to might remain our goal as well. The question that remains for us is the relation between democracy and capitalism. Capitalism is a source of severe discontents—an undoubted problem of our world—but seems intractable. It is no longer the case, as it was in the Cold War period, that capitalism is accepted as a necessary evil, to preserve the autonomy of civil society against the potentially “totalitarian” state. Rather, in our time, we accept capitalism in the much more degraded sense of Margaret Thatcher’s infamous expression, “There is no alternative!” But the recent crisis of neoliberalism means that even this ideology, predominant for a generation, has seemingly worn thin. Social revolution seems necessary—again.

But there is an unmistakable shying away from such tasks on the Left today. Political party, never mind revolution, seems undesirable in the present. For political parties are defined by their ability and willingness to take power.¹⁹ Today, the people—the *demos*—seem resigned to their political powerlessness. Indeed, forming a political party aiming at radical democracy, let alone socialism—a “Jacobin” party—would itself be a revolutionary act. Perhaps this is precisely the reason why it is avoided. The image of Lenin haunting us reminds that we could do otherwise.

It is Lenin who offers the memory, however distant, of the relation between political and social revolution, the relation between the need for democracy—the “rule of the people”—and the task of socialism. This is the reason that Lenin is either forgotten entirely—in an unconscious psychological blind-spot²⁰—or is ritualistically invoked only to be demonized. Nevertheless, the questions raised by Lenin remain.

The irrelevance of Lenin is his relevance. **IP**

1. On December 17, 2011, I gave a presentation on “The relevance of Lenin today” at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, broadcasting it live on the Internet. This essay is an abbreviated, edited, and somewhat further elaborated version, especially in light of subsequent events. Video and audio recordings of my original presentation can be found online at <<http://chriscutrone.platypus1917.org/?p=1507>>.
2. Kurt Anderson, “The Protester,” *Time*, December 26, 2011 - January 2, 2012, available online at <http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2101745_2102132,00.html>.
3. Ibid.
4. Thomas Jefferson, *The Declaration of Independence and other writings* (Verso Revolutions Series), ed. Michael Hardt (London: Verso, 2007), 46–47. Also available online at <<http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/d/592/>>.
5. Lenin, *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back* (1904). Available online at <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1904/onestep/q.htm>>.
6. See my “Egypt, or history’s invidious comparisons: 1979, 1789, and 1848,” *Platypus Review* 33 [March 2011], available online at <<http://platypus1917.org/2011/03/01/egypt-or-history%E2%80%99s-invidious-comparisons-1979-1789-and-1848/>>; and “The Marxist hypothesis: A response to Alain Badiou’s ‘communist hypothesis,’” *Platypus Review* 29 (November 2010), available online at <<http://platypus1917.org/2010/11/06/the-marxist-hypothesis-a-response-to-alain-badous-communist-hypothesis/>>.
7. Available online at <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1918/12/30.htm>>.
8. This is in Kautsky’s critique of Karl Korsch’s rumination on Luxemburg and Lenin in “Marxism and philosophy” (1923), “A destroyer of vulgar-Marxism” (1924), trans. Ben Lewis, *Platypus Review* 43 [February 2012], available online at <<http://platypus1917.org/2012/01/30/destroyer-of-vulgar-marxism/>>.
9. See my “1873–1973: The century of Marxism: The death of Marxism and the emergence of neo-liberalism and neo-anarchism,” *Platypus Review* 47 [June 2012], available online at

- <<http://platypus1917.org/2012/06/07/1873-1973-the-century-of-marxism/>>.
10. See Tamas Krausz, “Lenin’s legacy today,” *Platypus Review* 39 [September 2011], available online at <<http://platypus1917.org/2011/08/31/lenin%E2%80%99s-legacy-today/>>.
11. See my “Lenin’s liberalism,” *Platypus Review* 36 [June 2011], available online at <<http://platypus1917.org/2011/06/01/lenin%E2%80%99s-liberalism/>>; and “Lenin’s politics: A rejoinder to David Adam on Lenin’s liberalism,” *Platypus Review* 40 [October 2011], available online at <<http://platypus1917.org/2011/09/25/lenins-politics/>>.
12. See Marx, *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* [1852], available online at <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/>>.
13. Marx, *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.
14. See Spencer Leonard, “Going it alone: Christopher Hitchens and the death of the Left,” *Platypus Review* 11 [March 2009], available online at <<http://platypus1917.org/2009/03/15/going-it-alone-christopher-hitchens-and-the-death-of-the-left/>>.
15. See Tony Cliff, *Lenin* (4 vols., 1975, 1976, 1978 and 1979; vols. 1–2 available online at <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/index.htm>>); however, see also the critique of Cliff by the Spartacist League, *Lenin and the Vanguard Party* (1978), available online at <<http://www.bolshevik.org/Pamphlets/LeninVanguard/LVP%200.htm>>.
16. See my “The decline of the Left in the 20th century: Toward a theory of historical regression: 1917,” *Platypus Review* 17 [November 2009].
17. See my “1873–1973: The century of Marxism,” *Platypus Review* 47 [June 2012], available online at <<http://platypus1917.org/2012/06/07/1873-1973-the-century-of-marxism/>>.
18. See Ben Lewis and Tom Riley, “Lenin and the Marxist Left after #Occupy,” *Platypus Review* 47 [June 2012], available online at <<http://platypus1917.org/2012/06/07/lenin-and-the-marxist-left-after-occupy/>>.
19. See J.P. Nettl, “The German Social Democratic Party 1890–1914 as a political model,” *Past & Present* 30 [April 1965], 65–95.
20. But Lenin is more than the symptom that, for instance, Slavoj Žižek takes him to be. See “The Occupy movement, a renascent Left, and Marxism today,” *Platypus Review* 42 [December 2011–January 2012], available online at <<http://platypus1917.org/2011/12/01/occupy-movement-interview-with-slavoj-zizek/>>.

The relevance of Lenin today

Chris Cutrone

"If the Bolshevik Revolution is—as some people have called it—the most significant political event of the 20th century, then Lenin must for good or ill be considered the century's most significant political leader. Not only in the scholarly circles of the former Soviet Union, but even among many non-Communist scholars, he has been regarded as both the greatest revolutionary leader and revolutionary statesman in history, as well as the greatest revolutionary thinker since Marx."
— Encyclopedia Britannica

2011—year of revolution?¹

Time magazine nominated "the protester," from the Arab Spring to the #Occupy movement, as "Person of the Year" for 2011.² In addressing the culture of the #Occupy movement, *Time* listed some key books to be read, in a sidebar article, "How to stock a protest library."³ Included were *A People's History of the United States* by Howard Zinn, *The Prison Notebooks* by Antonio Gramsci, *Multitude* by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, and *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* by Slavoj Žižek.

Time's lead article by Kurt Anderson compared the Arab Spring and #Occupy movement to the beginnings of the Great French Revolution in 1789, invoking the poem "The French Revolution as It Appeared to Enthusiasts at Its Commencement" by William Wordsworth. Under the title "The Beginning of History," Anderson wrote that,

Aftermaths are never as splendid as uprisings. Solidarity has a short half-life. Democracy is messy and hard, and votes may not go your way. Freedom doesn't appear all at once.... No one knows how the revolutions will play out: A bumpy road to stable democracy, as in America two centuries ago? Radicals' taking over, as in France just after the bliss and very heaven? Or quick counterrevolution, as in France 60 years later [in 1848]? [75]

The imagination of revolution in 2011 was, it appears, 1789 without consequences: According to Wordsworth, it was "bliss... in that dawn to be alive" and "to be young was very heaven." In this respect, there was an attempt to exorcise the memory of revolution in the 20th century—specifically, the haunting memory of Lenin.

1789 and 1917

There were once *two* revolutions considered definitive of the modern period, the French Revolution of 1789 and the Russian Revolution of 1917. Why did Diego Rivera paint Lenin in his mural "Man at the Crossroads" (1933) in Rockefeller Center, as depicted in the film *Cradle Will Rock* (1999), about the Popular Front against War and Fascism of the 1930s? "Why not Thomas Jefferson?," asked John Cusack, playing Nelson Rockefeller, ingenuously. "Ridiculous!," Ruben Blades, playing Rivera, responded with defiance, "Lenin stays!" Still, Jefferson, in his letter of January 3, 1793 to U.S. Ambassador to France William Short, wrote,

The tone of your letters had for some time given me pain, on account of the extreme warmth with which they censured the proceedings of the Jacobins of France.... In the struggle which was necessary, many guilty persons fell without the forms of trial, and with them some innocent. These I deplore as much as any body, and shall deplore some of them to the day of my death. But I deplore them as I should have done had they fallen in battle. It was necessary to use the arm of the people, a machine not quite so blind as balls and bombs, but blind to a certain degree. A few of their cordial friends met at their hands, the fate of enemies. But time and truth will rescue and embalm their memories, while their posterity will be enjoying that very liberty for which they would never have hesitated to offer up their lives. The liberty of the whole earth was depending on the issue of the contest, and was ever such a prize won with so little innocent blood? My own affections have been deeply wounded by some of the martyrs to this cause, but rather than it should have failed, I would have seen half the earth desolated. Were there but an Adam and an Eve left in every country, and left free, it would be better than as it now is.⁴

The image of 18th century Jacobins and 20th century Bolsheviks haunts any revolutionary politics, up to today. Lenin characterized himself as a "revolutionary social democrat," a "Jacobin who wholly identifies himself with the organization of the proletariat... conscious of its class interests."⁵ What did it mean to identify as a "Jacobin" in Lenin's turn-of-the-20th century socialist workers' movement? Was it to be merely the most intransigent, ruthless revolutionary, for whom "the ends justify the means," like Robespierre? But the question of "Jacobinism" in subsequent history, after the 18th century, involves the transformation of the tasks of the bourgeois revolution in the 19th century. To stand in the tradition of Jacobinism in the 19th century meant, for Lenin, to identify with the workers' movement for socialism. Furthermore, for Lenin, it meant to be a *Marxist*.

1848?

There is another date besides 1789 and 1917 that needs to be considered: 1848. This was the time of the "Spring of the Nations" in Europe. But these revolutions failed. This was the moment of Marx and Engels's *Communist Manifesto*, published in anticipation of the revolution, just days before its outbreak. So, the question is not so much, How was Lenin a "Jacobin"?, but, rather, How was Lenin a "Marxist"? This is because 1848, the defining moment of Marxism, tends to drop out of the historical imagination of revolution today,⁶

whereas for Marxism in Lenin's time 1848 was the lodestar. Rosa Luxemburg, in her speech to the founding congress of the German Communist Party (Spartacus League), "On the Spartacus programme" (1918), offered a remarkable argument about the complex, recursive historical dialectic of progression and regression issuing from 1848. Here, Luxemburg stated that,

Great historical movements have been the determining causes of today's deliberations. The time has arrived when the entire socialist programme of the proletariat has to be established upon a new foundation. We are faced with a position similar to that which was faced by Marx and Engels when they wrote the *Communist Manifesto* seventy years ago.... With a few trifling variations, [the formulations of the *Manifesto*]... are the tasks that confront us today. It is by such measures that we shall have to realize socialism. Between the day when the above programme [of the *Manifesto*] was formulated, and the present hour, there have intervened seventy years of capitalist development, and the historical evolutionary process has brought us back to the standpoint [of Marx and Engels in the *Manifesto*].... The further evolution of capital has... resulted in this, that... it is our immediate objective to fulfill what Marx and Engels thought they would have to fulfill in the year 1848. But between that point of development, that beginning in the year 1848, and our own views and our immediate task, there lies the whole evolution, not only of capitalism, but in addition that of the socialist labor movement.⁷

This is because, as Luxemburg had put it in her 1900 pamphlet *Reform or Revolution*, the original contradiction of capital, the chaos of production versus its progressive socialization, had become compounded by a new "contradiction," the growth in organization and consciousness of the workers' movement itself, which in Luxemburg's view did not ameliorate but exacerbated the social and political crisis and need for revolution in capital.

By contrast, however, see Luxemburg's former mentor Karl Kautsky's criticism of Lenin and Luxemburg, for their predilection for what Kautsky called "primitive Marxism." Kautsky wrote that, "All theoreticians of communism delight in drawing on primitive Marxism, on the early works, which Marx and Engels wrote before they turned thirty, up until the revolution of 1848 and its aftermath of 1849 and 1850."⁸

Marxism and "Leninism"

In 2011, it seems, *Time* magazine, among others, could only regard revolution in terms of 1789. This is quite unlike the period of most of the 20th century prior to 1989—the centenary of the French Revolution also marked the beginning of the collapse of the Soviet Union—in which 1789 could be recalled only in terms of 1917. A historical link was drawn between Bolshevism and the Jacobins. In the collapse of 20th century Communism, not only the demon of 1917 but also 1789 seemed exorcized.

Did 1917 and 1789 share only disappointing results, the terror and totalitarianism, and an ultimately conservative, oppressive outcome, in Napoleon Bonaparte's Empire and Stalin's Soviet Union? 1917 seems to have complicated and deepened the problems of 1789, underscoring Hegel's caveats about the terror of revolution. It would appear that Napoleon stands in the same relation to Robespierre as Stalin stands to Lenin. But the problems of 1917 need to be further specified, by reference to 1848 and, hence, to Marxism, as a post-1848 historical phenomenon.⁹ The question concerning Lenin is the question of Marxism.¹⁰

This is because there would be no discussing Marxism today without the role of the Bolsheviks in the October Revolution. The relevance of Marxism is inevitably tied to Lenin. Marxism continues to be relevant either because of or despite Lenin.¹¹ But what is the significance of Lenin as a historical figure from the point of view of Marxism?

For Marx, history presented new tasks in 1848, different from those confronting earlier forms of revolutionary politics, such as Jacobinism. Marx thus distinguished "the revolution of the 19th century" from that of the 18th.¹² But where the 18th century seemed to have succeeded, the 19th century appeared to have failed: history repeated itself, according to Marx, "the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce."¹³ Trying to escape this debacle, Marxism expressed and sought to specify the tasks of revolution in the 19th century. The question of Lenin's relevance is how well (or poorly) Lenin, as a 20th century revolutionary, expressed the tasks inherited from 19th century Marxism. How was Lenin, as a Marxist, adequately (or inadequately) conscious of the tasks of history?

The recent (December 2011) passing of Christopher Hitchens (1949–2011) provides an occasion for considering the fate of Marxism in the late 20th century.¹⁴ Hitchens's formative experience as a Marxist was in a tendency of Trotskyism, the International Socialists, who, in the 1960s and early 1970s period of the New Left, characterized themselves, as Hitchens once put it, as "Luxemburgist." This was intended to contrast with "Leninism," which had been, during the Cold War, at least associated, if not simply equated, with Stalinism. The New Left, as anti-Stalinist, in large measure considered itself to be either anti-Leninist, or, more generously, post-Leninist, going beyond Lenin. The New Left sought to leave Lenin behind—at least at first. Within a few short years of the crisis of 1968, however, the International Socialists, along with many others on the Left, embraced "Leninism."¹⁵ What did this mean?



Cover of *Time* magazine vol. 175 no. 28 December 26, 2011–January 2, 2012, design by Shepard Fairey.

The New Left and the 20th century

Prior to the crisis of the New Left in 1968, "Leninism" meant something very specific. Leninism was "anti-imperialist," and hence anti-colonialist, or, even, supportive of Third World nationalism, in its outlook for revolutionary politics. The relevance of Leninism, especially for the metropolitan countries—as opposed to the peripheral, post-colonial regions of the world—seemed severely limited, at best.

In the mid-20th century, it appeared that Marxism was only relevant as "Leninism," a revolutionary ideology of the "underdeveloped" world. In this respect, the metropolitan New Left of the core capitalist countries considered itself to be not merely post-Leninist but post-Marxist—or, more accurately, post-Marxist because it was post-Leninist.

After the crisis of 1968, however, the New Left transitioned from being largely anti-Leninist to becoming "Leninist." This was when the significance of Maoism, through the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China, transformed from seeming to be relevant only to peasant guerilla-based revolutionism and "new democracy" in the post-colonial periphery, to becoming a modern form of Marxism with potential radical purchase in the core capitalist countries. The turn from the 1960s to the 1970s involved a neo-Marxism and neo-Leninism. The ostensibly Marxist organizations that exist today are mostly characterized by their formation and development during this renaissance of "Leninism" in the 1970s. Even the anti-Leninists of the period bear the marks of this phenomenon, for instance, anarchism.

The New Left leading up to 1968 was an important moment of not merely confrontation but also cross-fertilization between anarchism and Marxism. This was the content of supposed "post-Marxism": see, for example, the ex-Marxist, anarchist Murray Bookchin, who protested against the potential return of Leninism in his famous 1969 pamphlet, *Listen, Marxist!* In this, there was recalled an earlier moment of anarchist and Marxist rapprochement—in the Russian Revolution, beginning as early as 1905, but developing more deeply in 1917 and the founding of the Communist International in its wake. There were splits and regroupments in this period not only among Social Democrats and Communists but also among Marxists and anarchists. It also meant the new adherence to Marxism by many who, prior to World War I and the Russian Revolution, considered themselves "post-Marxist," such as Georg Lukács.

The reconsideration of and return to "Marxism/Leninism" in the latter phase of the New Left in the '70s, circa and after the crisis of 1968, thus recapitulated an earlier moment of reconfiguration of the Left. The newfound "Leninism" meant the New Left "getting serious" about politics. The figure of Lenin is thus involved in not only the division between "reformist" Social Democrats and "revolutionary" Communists in the crisis of World War I and the Russian and other revolutions (such as in Germany, Hungary, and Italy) that followed, or the division between liberalism and socialism in the mid-20th century context of the Cold War, but also between anarchists and Marxists, both in the era of the Russian Revolution and, later, in the New Left. It is in this sense that Lenin is a world-historical figure in the history of the Left.¹⁶ "Leninism" meant a turn to "revolutionary" politics and the contest for power—or so, at least, it seemed.

But did Lenin and "Leninism" represent a progressive development for Marxism, either in 1917 or after 1968? For anarchists, social democrats and liberals, the answer is "No." For them, Lenin represented a degeneration of Marxism into Jacobinism, terror, and totalitarian dictatorship, or, short of that, into an authoritarian political impulse, a lowering of horizons—Napoleon, after all, was a Jacobin! If anything, Lenin revealed the truth of Marxism as, at least potentially, an

authoritarian and totalitarian ideology, as the anarchists and others had warned already in the 19th century.

For avowed "Leninists," however, the answer to the question of Lenin as progress is "Yes": Lenin went beyond Marx. Either in terms of anti-imperialist and/or anti-colonialist politics of the Left, or simply by virtue of successfully implementing Marxism as revolutionary politics "in practice," Lenin is regarded as having successfully brought Marxism into the 20th century.

But perhaps what ought to be considered is what Lenin himself thought of his contribution, in terms of either the progression or regression of Marxism, and how to understand this in light of the prior history leading into the 20th century.

Lenin as a Marxist

Lenin's 1917 pamphlet, *The State and Revolution*, did not aspire to originality, but was, rather, an attempted synthesis of Engels and Marx's various writings that they themselves never made: specifically, of the *Communist Manifesto*, *The Civil War in France* (on the Paris Commune), and *Critique of the Gotha Programme*. Moreover, Lenin was writing against subsequent Marxists' treatments of the issue of the state, especially Kautsky's. Why did Lenin take the time during the crisis, not only of the collapse of the Tsarist Russian Empire but of the First World War, to write on this topic? The fact of the Russian Revolution is not the only explanation. World War I was a far more dramatic crisis than the Revolutions of 1848 had been, and a far greater crisis than the Franco-Prussian War that had ushered in the Paris Commune. Socialism clearly seemed more *necessary* in Lenin's time. But was it more *possible*? Prior to World War I, Kautsky would have regarded socialism as more possible, but after World War I, Kautsky regarded it as less so, and with less necessity of priority. Rather, "democracy" seemed to Kautsky more necessary than, and a precondition for, the possibility of socialism.

For Lenin, the crisis of bourgeois society had matured. It had grown, but had it *advanced*? For Lenin, the preconditions of socialism had also been eroded and not merely further developed since Marx's time. Indeed Kautsky, Lenin's great Marxist adversary in 1917, regarded WWI as a setback and not as an opportunity to struggle for socialism. Lenin's opponents considered him fanatical. The attempt to turn the World War into a civil war—socialist revolution—seemed dogmatic zealotry. For Kautsky, Lenin's revolutionism seemed part of the barbarism of the War rather than an answer to it.

Marx made a wry remark, in his writing on the Paris Commune, that the only possibility of preserving the gains of bourgeois society was through the "dictatorship of the proletariat." Marx savaged the liberal politician who put down the Commune, Adolphe Thiers. However, in his *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, Marx regarded his followers as having regressed behind and fallen below the threshold of the bourgeois liberals of the time. Marx castigated his ostensible followers for being less "practically internationalist" than the cosmopolitan, free-trade liberals were, and for being more positive about the state than the liberals.

Lenin marshaled Marx's rancor, bringing it home in the present, against Kautsky. World War I may have made socialism apparently less possible, but it also made it more necessary. This is the dialectical conception of "socialism or barbarism" that Lenin shared with Rosa Luxemburg, and what made them common opponents of Kautsky. Luxemburg and Lenin regarded themselves as "orthodox," faithful to the revolutionary spirit of Marx and Engels, whereas Kautsky was a traitor—"renegade." Kautsky opposed democracy to socialism but betrayed them both.